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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses rural education in Vermont and the forces that influence the state's rural educational research agenda. The paper presents the recent history and current conditions at the University of Vermont (UVM), current demographic observations concerning Vermont's population, and special features about the state's educational enterprise. UVM is a university of approximately 10,500 students in programs ranging from agriculture to arts and sciences. Aside from the college's Center for Rural Studies there are a number of faculty in other fields who share a strong interest in rural issues. The state is going through a significant change of character brought on by dramatic population changes. The traditional agricultural character has been supplanted as Vermont has become a countryside retreat for new and emerging middle- and upper-class professionals. These changes bring about a different set of values and expectations for public education. The transitional nature of rural communities, combined with the high emphasis on local government, has often turned school systems into local battlegrounds for opposing points of view. State-level discussions have increasingly focused on the measure of educational quality and how Vermont's rural schools will meet state standards. This dilemma calls for further research. Such research should take into account the following factors: historical and cultural influences on rural communities; external influences on rural education; and contemporary social issues. Suggested subjects for future research include: demographic shifts; school quality and size; telecommunications; and public policy implementation. (TES)

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Rural Education Research: An Higher Education Perspective Within A Rural State Context

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by

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Rural education owes its meaning to the context in which it is observed and understood. This is no less true of the rural education researcher. Those who attempt to systematically conduct enquiry in rural settings come to know their subject by its surroundings. This is particularly the case when the researcher's immediate milieu is geographically and socially dependent on a specific rural environment for sustenance and insight. It is from this position that the observations which follow are derived. That is, the State of Vermont, which according to the 1980 census is the most rural state in the United States, and the University of Vermont (UVM) are inextricably linked. This is the case even though the University of Vermont (UVM) receives a small amount of state aid (approximately 15% of its annual budget) and historically has operated as a "private" institution. Yet, culturally these two institutions have been intertwined for nearly 200 years and share much in common. It is this context which shaped the perspective that follows. Presented in this paper are the recent history and current conditions at the UVM, current demographic observations concerning the State of Vermont's population, and special features about the educational enterprise of Vermont. From this rich description is derived some implications for rural education

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research. Included in these implications are some possible trail markers to guide the conduct of rural education research and future directions for rural educational research.

Recent History and Current Conditions at UVM

University of Vermont is a very comprehensive university of approximately 8000 undergraduates and 2500 graduate students in programs ranging from agriculture to arts and sciences to education. The College of Education and Social Services has typical undergraduate programs in teacher education and a program in social work. At the graduate level it offers programs in teacher education, special education, counseling, higher education, and educational administration. In 1982, the College initiated a doctoral program in educational administration, its first and only doctoral level program. This program has several special features to it including a program designed to accommodate the in-place professional on a part time basis. The curriculum of the program has several thematic orientations including educational leadership, applied educational research, policy analysis, and rural educational research. These orientations were developed in recognition of the fact that the Vermont State Department of Education and local school districts have limited research capacity but high interest in and need for systematic inquiry.

In addition to the Ed. D. program in educational administration, at the UVM exist a Center for Rural Studies and a number of faculty in political science, resource economics,

sociology, and education who share a strong interest in rural settings. Therefore, it is understandable how the theme of rural educational research was inspired and gained sustenance in the educational administration doctoral program.

State of Vermont and Related Demographic Changes

At present there are about 550,000 (Free Press, 1988) people in the State of Vermont. This represents a 7.1 percent increase since 1980 when the population was slightly over 500,000. Nationwide there was a 7.4 percent increase.

Up to 1950, Vermont was the most Republican state in U.S. It elected only GOP candidates for 104 years and once supported a Democrat for president (1964). In 1978 seventeen percent of Vermonters described themselves as liberals, today thirty percent do so. In fact, Jesse Jackson garnered twenty six percent of the Vermont Democratic vote and half of the State's delegates. Currently state and local political offices are occupied by yuppies and out-of-staters (e.g., Speaker of the House, President of the Senate, Lieutenant Governor, Governor, and the mayor of Vermont's largest city who is a self proclaimed socialist). In fact the latter person, socialist mayor, running in the most recent election as an independent for the State's only congressional seat, missed in a squeaker, losing by two percentage points to the Republican candidate.

The 1980 U.S. Census discovered of the 343,000 Vermonters age 20 and older, 53,000 had not lived in Vermont five years earlier. Up to 1950, Vermont experienced out-migration, in 1980

over half of its growth could be attributed to in-migration versus natural growth. From 1970 to 1980, half of the State's increased population was attributable to persons migrating to the state. Since 1980 a third of the increase of population was caused by in-migration.

In 1950, 10,000 dairy farms existed, today there are approximately 2,592 (as of July 1, 1988) with an additional ten percent expected to go out of business in the coming year. Vermont lost 438 farms between 1982 and 1987 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Currently there are 5,877 farms overall. And contrary to popular opinion, there are fewer cows (179,000) than people (548,000) in the State of Vermont. (Free Press, 1988)

To summarize the nature of the Vermont population and its life style is offered in the following description.

> At noon on a winter day, when the part-time Legislature is in session, the bistros along State Street swarm with good-looking young policy people dressed in strange hybrid outfits - a chalk-stripe suit with a buffalo plaid lumberjack shirt and foulard tie; a Laura Ashley schoolmarm frock worn with L.L. Bean gum-bottom slush boots. A few of the men have their long hair neatly tied back in ponytails, an echo of the old hippie days that still linger on here. The organic grocery store downtown sells fresh shiitake mushrooms and balsamic vinegar - ingredients not called for in

> the Yankee pot roast recipes. There is about Montpelier the never-never land air of a perpetual college campus.[1]

As can be observed, the State of Vermont is going through a significant change of character brought on by a dramatic shift in demographics. The traditional agricultural image has given way to a countryside retreat for new and emerging middle and upper class professionals. With these new emigres come with a much different set of values and expectations for a range of governmental services including schools and which will have profound effect on the nature of Vermont's educational systems.

State of Vermont Educational Systems

In New England and particularly in Vermont, local control is a highly cherished value and traditional expectation when it comes to the governance of schools. As a result, less than twenty percent of the school boards operate K - 12 systems. Only fourteen of 323 school boards employ their own superintendent resulting in most superintendents serving anywhere from five to nine school boards. More than 6000 school board business meeting are conducted each year at a cost of three million dollars (The Special Commission on School Governance, 1987). There are 60 supervisory school districts in Vermont.

Vermont ranks 46th in average teacher salary ($20,325) and ranks second in pupil/teacher ratio (14/1). The average per

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[1]Kunstler, James Howard, "The Selling of Vermont," New York Times Magazine, April 10, 1988, pp. 53-54.

pupil expenditures ranking is nineteenth ($3,651), per capita income is ranked 37th ($9,979), and percent of poverty, ages five through seventeen, ranks 29th (thirteen percent) (U.S. Department of Education, 1987).

The average Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) scores rank fourth at 916 with 52% of the students taking the examination. Sixty plus percent of Vermont parents rate their schools A or B in regard to the quality of local education versus 40% of the parents nation-wide (Free Press, 1988). According to the recent Carnegie report (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1988), Vermont teachers ranked number one in teachers' perception of being involved in decision making and curriculum development.

These statistics suggest that Vermonters are getting quite a bang for their buck. They have small class sizes, do not have to pay dearly for their teachers, students performance is high in spite of a high number of low income students, and they have maximized local control with a large number of small administrative units. It is no wonder that the schools receive such a high rating of satisfaction by the parents.

However, the State in not without major issues and future challenges. For example, changing demographics previously alluded to is creating cross currents in local communities that did not exist twenty or so years ago. Vermont rural communities are truly communities in transition and this, as is often the case, has turned the school into the local battleground for

apposing points of view particularly when it comes to services, programs, and curricula. It is not uncommon to observe a range of demographic groupings at a local town meeting that include traditional agricultural poor, professional middle and upper income urban out-migrators, rural gentry and trust fund land owners, back-to-the-land yuppies, cottage industry entrepreneurs, Southeastern Asian and Latin American immigrants, and retirees. This mix creates unlimited points-of-view and no doubt has contributed to the high turnover of school administrators in the State of Vermont.

The so called "excellence movement" has had its impact in Vermont. Recently the governor of Vermont established a task force for examining the governance structure of Vermont schools and how to make the system more efficient (read consolidation). This review may have created more heat than light but public outcry and reaffirmation for their small rural schools sidetracked this effort. This issue, however, has forced more dialogue concerning how the quality of education is to be measured at the state and local levels. There is little doubt as the state sets specific standards, particularly in various subject areas at the secondary level, that small secondary schools will be hard put to provide the necessary courses, etc. The newly implemented state level Public School Approval policy and its long list of standards will place heavy pressure on small and relatively poor communities to either spend more or consider consolidation. Thus far, these communities are trying to comply

and at the same time test the State's willingness to be flexible. The jury is still out but time is running out on small, under financed schools. The day of reckoning has been temporarily postponed by an increase in state aid for the past two years. More time and study are needed to determine the impact of these new state level policies.

Implications for Rural Education Research

The preceding sections offer some insight concerning the influences which exist within a rural state context. These influences suggest trail markers for the conceptualization of rural educational research efforts. The following are offered as guides in considering the direction to which rural research efforts might be targeted.

1. Historical and cultural influences of the rural environment - As portrayed in this paper, the State of Vermont is undergoing significant population shifts which are impacting rural communities in variety of ways. Persons moving into these small rural communities bring with them their histories and cultural orientations and in turn are impacted by their newly adopted community's history and cultural. For example, in Vermont the town meeting style of local government exist and is acted out with all the panoply of history and culture that one can imagine. To study the current practices of town meeting without understanding its past practices and current manifestations would be missing an important insight of how past and present meet to create the future. Each community will

resolve these clashes in different ways and the spin off effect on the school system is difficult to surmise. However, to study a school and its policies and practices without considering the present as an outcome of past history and culture may be missing an important link to understanding present and future policies and practices.

2. Interdependent context of rural education - Since rural communities are prohibited from building large walls on their perimeters, as in medieval times, they have to cope with their interdependent nature. As the spate of reform reports and invidious comparisons of American schools with foreign counterparts have so aptly demonstrated, rural schools are and have been impacted extensively. The Public School Approval policy in Vermont is but one small example of this type of interdependence and influence. Again to study a rural school without recognizing the variety of external influences including but not limited to other neighboring districts, state departments of education, regional higher education faculty members, regional educational laboratories, partisan educational lobbying groups, U.S. Department of Education, state legislative initiatives, and last but least, international research and development interests. Modern communications technology and the mobility of educators and community members provide opportunities heretofore limited by rural isolation. These exposures are rich in potential ideas for a myriad of perceived local concerns and problems. Tracing these probable connections can provide insight to the nature of the

rural school change process.

3. Prevailing contemporary social issues - A recent poll by Rural Voice (Free Press, 1988), a non-profit research organization, revealed that 61 percent of rural Americans have fears that the rural lifestyle is being lost. A large percentage - 30 percent - expect they or members of their family will move to a city in the next few years. The poll, with a 4 percent margin of error, found "37 percent rate the economic condition of rural America as good, while 61 percent rate it fair or good." It is clear from this poll and other economic data that rural areas are hard pressed to provide persons with the essentials of life and for their schools to ameliorate the harmful effects of poverty. Our understanding of the impact of shifting social conditions and economic deprivation upon rural schools and vice versa is vitally needed. Investigations of rural school policies and practices may offer insight as to how the school perpetuates inequities or increases opportunities.

4. Importance of anchoring rural education research within a theoretical framework - Given the complexities of interdependence of rural areas and their schools, the need for theoretical frameworks seem preeminent. That is, the investigations of rural school problems would be greatly enhanced by the guidance of an over-arching framework. A framework which is comprehensive, provides insight on which variables to examine, and aids in the interpretation of the findings of the study. As we aggregate more and more case studies about rural schools, it

is a propitious time to synthesize existing cases studies, target additional case studies, and begin to generate theories about rural school change and promising practices. It seems, for example, existing theories of general and social systems, organizations, and community development offer some guidance in explaining the nature of rural school/community qualities.

Potential Future Directions for Rural Education Research

The preceding sections illustrate environmental conditions of a rural state, its communities, and its schools. These conditions offer trail markers which offer some general direction for conducting rural educational research. In this final section is offered some specific areas which seem worthy of focusing the rural education research agenda. These target areas have collective power for providing more insight about the rural condition and what new directions would be worthy of consideration. The following areas are suggested for new and continued efforts.

1. Demographic shifts - As indicated earlier, there are data that suggest the rural countryside is changing subtly and dramatically at the same time. There are census data that show a new mixed of ethnic and economic groups. There is the self reported polls of persons needing to move to urban areas for jobs. And to further complicate things, these shifts are different for different sections of the United States. Middle America is continuing to experience out-migration of its youth, Appalachia is continuing to experience long term sustained

poverty, and New England is witnessing the buying and selling of rural land for vacation homes and alternative life styles for middle and upper income professionals. This all suggests the development of monitoring systems, possibly through regional labs, of critical data on rural schools and communities. Each state keeps track of its population trends and makeup, i.e., department of healths, and the state departments of education collect a variety of data, as well. What is missing is a careful combing of these data for rural schools/communities and the development of typologies. An effort is needed at aggregating these already available data with an eye toward describing unique categories of rural environments. With these categories as a backdrop, rural research studies can be better targeted and comparisons of findings can be greatly enhanced. These data may potentially explain why something that works in New England does not go over very big in Middle America. Even more importantly, however, such typologies may help in determining how much rural school/communities differ within the political boundaries of a state. Our explanatory power and the need for differentiation would be improved through a better data base of rural areas and their schools.

2. <u>Organization and size of unit impact</u> - Two recent studies (Monk & Haller, 1986 and Walberg, 1987) suggest some interesting findings concerning the unique qualities of small rural school organizations. It seems the cause of rural schools may be greatly improved by further documentation of the virtues of

smallness and rural. These findings may offer or suggest other solutions to rural educational problems besides consolidation.

3. Quality and equality issues - There is little doubt that the so called "excellence movement" places considerable pressure on schools to demonstrate their effectiveness. This is even more true of rural schools. A quick glance at recent efforts by states to raise the educational standards and performance of their schools is going to hit rural schools particulary hard. As is often the case, performance standards are operationalized in very narrow terms (i.e., so many credits of foreign language, science, mathematics, etc.) and rigidly interpreted. Rural school systems become hard put to comply with these requirements except through consolidation. If on the other hand, rural schools can demonstrate their assets rather than being viewed as a problem by these rather narrow and inflexible standards, then new definitions of quality may be added to the debate.

This point of view may also apply to the issue of equality. That is, are rural schools by their nature and size, able to eradicate the harmful effects of poverty and truly create equal opportunities for their students? Some preliminary findings on effective rural schools suggest this may be true but more documentation is needed.

4. Successful rural schools - Building off the research suggested in previous stated areas, the examination of successful rural schools naturally follows. Rural schools that are successful in keeping abreast of best educational practices, are

able to address problems, and/or create an environment which engenders continuous improvement, should be the subject of closer examination. Demographic characteristics, size, organizational culture, commitments to quality and equality offer potential explanations that permit some rural schools to stand apart from others. Understanding these factors should be the focus of further research.

5. Telecommunications technology - Many rural communities are being "wired." That is, the latest in telecommunications technology is being installed in rural areas with minimal insight as to its potential impact on these communities and their schools. There are a vast array of possible spin offs to this technology for schools and careful documentation of its uses and impact seems warranted. The potential for economic development of rural areas and the importation of special programs and curricula for students seems promising. This new technology may solve some of the rural isolation problems and enhance distance learning efforts.

6. Policy implementation studies - Three recently completed doctoral dissertations at the University of Vermont suggest some potential value is studying policy implementation. These studies examined the effects of the Public School Approval policy of the Vermont State Department of Education. As might be expected, there were some discrepancies and differing perceptions between the state's policy and its implementation at the local school level. The findings of these studies have been shared with

department of education persons, have been widely discussed, and are providing vital feedback on statewide policies. Similar studies are needed as states attempt to impact local rural school performance.

Summary

The content presented in this paper was designed to represent the forces which are influencing the rural educational research agenda in one rural state. Vermont's experiences may have implications for other rural states and regions of the United States. More discussion among rural educational researchers is desirable in validating the generalizability of the Vermont experience and setting the research agenda for the future. In any regard, an analysis of historical and cultural phenomena will need some attention in order to fully appreciate the rural legacy. These understandings may provide the insights needed for knowing what to change and what to preserve as rural areas slide or are pushed (possibly screaming and kicking) into the twenty-first century. A challenging research agenda but clearly needed.

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